

REMARKS AS PREPARED  
SAVING OUR SCHOOLS: EDUCATION REFORM IN AMERICA  
AKRON ROUND TABLE SPEECH  
U.S. SENATOR MIKE DEWINE  
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Thank you, Dr. Proenza, for that kind introduction. It is great to be back in Akron, and I am honored to join you for today's round table luncheon. I'm pleased to see Mayor Pasquellic, Congressman Tom Sawyer, and County Executive Jim McCarthy. I am pleased to see so many of you out there in the audience -- many of whom were here six years ago, when I spoke at the round table following my 1994 election to the Senate. My speech must not have been too bad if you're willing to subject yourselves to another one!

In all seriousness, though, it really is an honor for me to be back again this year. There are so many things that I'd like to talk with you about today -- so many pressing and important and controversial issues. I know we'll get a chance to discuss all sorts of topics during the question and answer period, and I'm looking forward to hearing your questions and concerns.

In the mean time, I would like to limit my prepared remarks to one very important subject that I care passionately about -- something I have a deep personal interest in as a Senator, as an Ohioan, and especially as a parent -- the father of eight children and the grandfather of six. This subject that I feel so strongly about is education -- the state of our schools, the strength of our teachers, the future of our children.

Right now, that future is in peril. It is in peril because our society is divided -- divided along economic and educational lines. This division is nothing new. Scholars and sociologists have been warning us for years that this is where our nation was heading, particularly if we did not properly educate our children. But sadly, we did not heed the warnings. And, as a result, it is our children who are paying the price.

Our nation today is a nation split into two Americas -- one where children get educated and one where they don't. This gap in educational knowledge and the gap in economic standing is entrenching thousands upon thousands of children into an underclass and into futures filled with poverty and little hope and opportunity.

If you don't fully understand what I'm getting at, just look at what's happening right here in our own state of Ohio, which mirrors what is happening all over the nation. Right here in Ohio, we have two classes. The growing income gap and education gap across the state, and especially in our inner cities and in Appalachia, is creating our very own permanent underclass. The practical result of this is a society that is growing farther and farther apart -- not closer and closer together.

While we certainly find children at risk in each of the 617 school districts across Ohio, the majority of them are living in our cities' lower-economic urban centers and in rural Appalachia and frequently in broken and unhappy homes.

This is a problem we cannot understate. It is a huge societal problem that we must address. But, how do we do that?

How do we enable children in the underclass to rise above their circumstances -- those circumstances which are beyond their control?

How do we bring about equality in the opportunities each child has to lead full, meaningful, productive lives as adults?

I believe that the best way we can get to these children -- the best way we can help give them the tools they need to lead productive and happy and rewarding lives -- is through education. As Horace Mann -- a former president of Antioch College in Yellow Springs and the man known as "the father of public education" -- once said:

"Education, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of man -- the balance-wheel of the social machinery."

That is exactly what education can and should do. It should provide all children -- regardless of their economic circumstances or family backgrounds -- with the tools they need to make it as adults in our society -- the tools necessary to rise above individual situations of poverty and instability -- individual situations of hopelessness and despair.

Today's education system, however, is not always meeting this goal. Don't get me wrong. I'm not blaming the schools or the teachers or the parents for all of society's ills. Rather, what I am suggesting is that we, as a society, are failing to use the power and potential of our schools -- the power of education -- to help make up for what some children lack because of reasons far beyond their control.

No matter where a child lives -- whether it's in Marietta or Portsmouth or Akron or Hudson or Lawrence County or Monroe County -- every child -- every one of the 1.8 million children in the Ohio public schools and every one of the nearly 47 million children in public schools nationwide -- deserves the opportunity to learn and to become educated. Face it, our schools have our children in their hands for seven or eight hours, five days a week. That's not a whole lot of time, but it is time that our schools cannot afford to waste.

A line from a 1970s song says that "your dreams were your ticket out." For all too many children -- children living in poverty and in broken homes -- dreams, alone, are not enough. For those children, a dream and a solid education -- that combination -- is their "ticket out."

Again, this is not a new concept. Historically, our schools have been the best opportunity for children to move out and move up. Education has built our nation -- a nation of immigrants who, because of public schools, escaped ignorance, illiteracy, and lives of poverty. A strong public education tradition in this country kept entire generations from being marginalized and left behind.

The tragedy is that when education is not working to give our kids the tools they need to move ahead in life, those children suffer. Many of them, for example, don't get their high school diplomas. Right here in Akron, for example, only 72 percent of the city's high school class of 2000 graduated last year -- and that is actually a high rate for an urban area! The rates were much lower in other major Ohio cities. In Toledo, only 67 percent graduated; in Columbus 62 percent graduated; Youngstown 59 percent; Dayton 57 percent; Canton 53 percent; Cincinnati 51 percent; and in Cleveland, only 34 percent of the students who started high school actually finished. Yes -- that's right. Only one-third of the students in the Cleveland public high schools graduated -- two-thirds didn't.

There is something wrong with that. There is something wrong in Ohio and in this country when that many of our kids aren't graduating.

There is also something wrong in this country when nearly one-third of college freshman must take remedial courses before they can begin regular college-level course work.

There is something wrong in this country when over one-third of fourth graders can't read. The National Assessment of Educational Progress tested 8,000 fourth-graders across the country last year for reading skills. They ranked them according to four levels of achievement: advanced, proficient, basic, and below basic. Tragically, 37 percent of those tested scored below basic. In other words, 37 percent of those children basically cannot read.

I wonder, too, about another statistic. Nearly three out of four teenagers today attend a high school with an enrollment of more than 1,000 students. Let me repeat that. Nearly three out of four -- that's right, nearly 75 percent -- of teenagers today attend high schools with enrollments topping 1,000 students. I worry about that. I worry about students in such big schools, where it's all too easy to get lost.

So now what? Where do we go from here? How do we go about changing our current societal mind-set and the perceptions we have about education in this country?

The first thing we need to do is recognize that the answers lie mainly in the hands of parents, our local communities, our local school boards, and our state and local governments -- not in Washington. Nevertheless, Congress does have a role, albeit a small one, to play in prioritizing and directing limited federal dollars to where they can best help disadvantaged students in disadvantaged districts.

The best place to begin is by restoring accountability and achievement with the single most important resource in the classroom -- the teacher.

When I think about teachers, I think about something else Horace Mann once said. He said that "teaching is the most difficult of all arts and the profoundest of all sciences." I certainly can attest to that. As a college student at Miami University, I spent four and a half months as a student teacher at Princeton High School north of Cincinnati.

That was tough. Teaching is tough! In fact, teaching was one of the hardest things I have ever done. It was then that I learned -- first-hand -- that Ohio's and America's teachers simply don't get the respect, the admiration, nor the salaries they deserve.

While we may pay lip service to the importance of teaching as a profession, realistically, how many of you here today actually would recommend that your sons or your daughters or your grandchildren become high school or junior high or grade school teachers? If the answer is no, then something is definitely wrong.

Something is wrong with the system.

Something is wrong with the society.

Something is wrong with our attitudes about teachers and the way in which we recruit, reward, and retain them.

Sure -- we encourage our children to become doctors. We encourage them to become lawyers. And, there's nothing wrong with that. Doctor's save lives. And lawyers....well....maybe they're a bad example....

Teachers, though -- teachers shape lives. A good teacher has the power to fundamentally change the course of a child's life. I'm sure that each of us can recall at least one great teacher who inspired us or motivated us and changed our lives. These teachers guided us then and continue to influence us today.

As a parent, I know how important it is for children to have good teachers -- for our children to enjoy being in the classroom and to look forward to going to school each day. When they don't have quality teachers, our children suffer for an entire academic year.

It is so important for our kids that we attract the smartest and the most-dedicated in our society to the profession of teaching. And, we better move fast. The National Center for Education Statistics predicts that within the next decade, we will need to hire 1.7 to 2.7 million new teachers to replace those who retire or leave the profession.

While this exodus of teachers is certainly a daunting challenge and a very real and pending problem, it is also an enormous opportunity. It is an opportunity for us, as parents and as community members, to reshape the next decade of education in America.

When I think about that challenge and when I think about how we can shape education to the greatest benefit of our children, I am reminded of something my own high school principal, Mr. Malone, once told me. He said that when it comes to education, only two things really matter -- a willing student and a good teacher. Mr. Malone was right over thirty-five years ago, and he's still right today!

When you get right down to it, good teachers are second only to good parents in helping children

learn. And, any effort to restore confidence and improve quality in education must begin with a national recommitment to teaching as a profession.

As the Senate debates the education reform bill, we will have a great opportunity to expand and enhance and encourage support for Ohio's teachers -- and all teachers across the country. Specifically, I have written language in the bill that would help provide the following: support for people in other professions seeking a second career as a teacher; support for teachers seeking to improve subject knowledge or classroom skills; support for teachers seeking new ways to teach math, science, or history; and support for new teachers from experienced teachers who serve as mentors.

I am working to ensure that our teachers have access to training academies, where they can sharpen and improve their skills as teachers. There is just such a facility in Cincinnati called the Mayerson Academy. Teachers can go there to learn from seasoned educators -- experienced educators who can guide them and help them become stronger in the classroom. This kind of support should be available to teachers in every community in our country.

I also intend to propose an amendment to the upcoming Senate education bill that directly addresses our dire need to recruit and retain excellent teachers. I am working on a bipartisan basis with Senators Frist, Kennedy, Wellstone, Domenici, and Clinton on this effort, which would create a \$150 million competitive grant program to get and to keep good teachers -- especially math and science teachers -- in low-income urban and rural districts.

Additionally, we must help recruit good teachers not just from our schools of education, but from the military, industry, and research institutions -- professionals with established careers and real-world job experience. Let me tell you about a terrific program that brings second-career teachers into our schools called Troops to Teachers. Last year, I saved this program, and I fully intend to do the same again this year.

Troops to Teachers assists retiring military personnel in gaining the state certification necessary to teach. Furthermore, Troops to Teachers helps broaden the make-up and skills of our current teacher pool. And finally, it brings the best teachers to the schools and the children who need them most.

This program is the kind of program that gets much-needed minority teachers and mature teachers with real world experience in math and science into our most challenged districts. A 1999 study found that 30 percent of Troops participants are minorities, compared to 10 percent of all teachers; 30 percent are teaching math, compared to 13 percent of all teachers; 25 percent teach in urban schools; and 90 percent are male, compared to the current teaching force which is 74 percent female.

I personally have met troops turned teachers right here in Ohio -- teachers like Mark Swann and Darrell Byrom. Mark is a high school teacher in Meigs County, Ohio. He retired from the Navy in April 1999, and began teaching American History at Meigs High School in September 1999. Darrell is a fourth grade teacher at Eastgate Elementary School in Columbus. He retired from

the Air Force in March 1996, and began teaching the following August.

These two men essentially went from leading troops to teaching students. They exemplify the qualities we need in our classrooms -- qualities like integrity, responsibility, discipline, and leadership. They are role models.

I also believe that we can do much, much more to encourage good teachers -- specifically, National Board Certified teachers -- to work in low income school districts. You may be wondering: "What exactly is a National Board Certified teacher?" Well, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards is an extremely rigorous certification program that identifies exceptional classroom educators. This certification is a difficult, challenging, year-long process that measures a teacher's knowledge of subject matter and, more importantly, his or her ability to teach that material to students.

Last year, 331 teachers were certified in Ohio by the National Board, increasing the state's total to 924 educators -- the third highest of any state. I believe that federal funding for the Board and other federal efforts to recruit and retain teachers should be targeted toward bringing these teachers into our most needy schools.

We also need to increase the federal government's funding for an important program for disabled students -- the Individual's with Disabilities Act. This worthwhile federal program is one of the largest underfunded mandates on our local schools. We need to fully fund the federal government's commitment to this program, as it helps give teachers the ability to teach disabled students without detracting from the education of other students.

Finally, we can encourage teachers to teach in low-income districts -- the very districts where children need them most -- by re-examining the current student loan forgiveness programs.

Now, while I strongly believe that the teacher is the most important resource in the classroom, there are other issues in education that we need to address, like the problem of drugs and violence in our schools. I have fought for and will continue fighting to improve the \$600 million Safe and Drug Free Schools Program. This vital program provides funds to over 95 percent of school districts nationwide to keep our schools safe and drug-free.

We need this program. We need this program because a child threatened by drugs and violence is not be able to learn, and a teacher afraid to stand in front of the classroom is a unable to teach. And that -- that is a situation we should never, ever have in our schools.

I do believe that the government can make a difference in restoring quality and equality to education. On a federal level and on a state level, the government can help target programs to those children in those districts most in need. However, the whole realm of education is so big and so vital and so all-encompassing that it is something we cannot leave to the government, alone, to fix.

Parents and families and communities must take an active role in reforming our schools and in

helping our best teachers stay in our children's classrooms. Ultimately, if we are to change our culture of complacency and our responsibility-shifting attitudes, parents need to take the first step and get into their children's classrooms.

But sadly, parents and communities right now are just not playing a large enough role in our schools and in our children's lives.

What's happening today is that we build schools. We invest in them. But then, we let them sit idle during the summer and at night after school. As a result, schools, many times, are becoming foreign places -- buildings where we just drop off our kids in the morning and pick them up in the afternoon. It didn't used to be that way. When my older children were attending public school in Cedarville in Greene County, the school was a bonding place for the community. It wasn't a foreign, isolated place. Rather, it was a gathering place -- a place where the community came together for basketball games, concerts, school plays, and parent-teacher conferences. The school, quite simply, was the center of the community.

Right here in Akron, you have the opportunity to help your schools become the core of your community. You can do that as part of the huge project about to get underway to rebuild your public schools. I encourage each of you to use this as an opportunity to look at the school buildings differently. After all, they are going to be your schools for the next several decades.

This is a chance to make the school buildings more than just bricks and mortar. This is a chance for the Akron community to get into the schools -- to take part in the future of the district and ultimately the future of its students.

During the rebuilding process, I encourage you to think about how your schools can be used as facilities for a variety of activities. When the classrooms are empty, the school rooms can be used for adult education classes or for meeting places or for recreation centers. Think about building extra rooms onto your schools -- rooms for Head Start programs or for senior citizen centers. There are so many possibilities -- so many ways to get our families and our communities into our classrooms.

The reality is that research shows that few factors have a greater impact on student performance than family and community involvement in the schools. In fact, a study of Ohio schools found that high-performing districts exhibit a high degree of parent and community participation and support.

You have the chance now to make education a part of your community's culture. You have the chance to change the culture of complacency. You have the chance to give children in the underclass their tickets out.

And so today, I challenge you.

I challenge each one of you here to volunteer directly in the classroom and to participate in school activities.

I challenge parents to go into their children's schools and help the teachers teach -- volunteer to read to their classes or to help teach math or science or history or literature.

I challenge you to help provide opportunities for families in need -- help teach them -- help them learn how to help their own children succeed in school.

I challenge you to be mentors for those students who lack a strong, responsible, mature adult presence in their lives.

And, I challenge you to work with your schools to keep them safe and to keep drugs out of the hands of our kids.

Education reform and the paradigm shifts that go along with it are a journey toward the horizon -- not a destination, but a never-ending, forward-leading journey toward the future. So, as we move toward that horizon -- as we move ahead for the sake of our children -- we need to get back to basics -- good teachers, safe and drug-free schools, and parental and community involvement in the schools.

I am confident that we will go forth in the days ahead to give children the tools they need for a bright and promising future.

We will restore quality and community in our system of education.

We will establish a new way of thinking -- a way of thinking that challenges and changes the current culture of education in America.

We will restore education's ability to "equalize," as Horace Mann suggested.

And, as we do go forth toward that horizon, we should remember something Abraham Lincoln once said:

"A child is a person who is going to carry on what you have started. He is going to sit where you are sitting and when you are gone attend to those things which you think are important. He will assume control over your cities, states, and nations. He is going to move in and take over your churches, schools, universities, and corporations. The fate of humanity is in his hands."

That sentiment is as true today as it was a century and a half ago.

We cannot rest -- we must not rest -- until every child has teachers who are qualified to teach and schools that are safe, drug-free learning environments.

Our children's future -- and the future of Ohio and America -- hang in the balance.